



## Introduction

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# 1 Introduction

## Sustainability as a political concept in the Arctic

*Ulrik Pram Gad, Marc Jacobsen, and  
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In 2013, Greenland's legislature (*Inatsisartut*) overturned a 1988 ban on the mining of radioactive materials. While the critics of this controversial decision highlighted the environmental hazards involved in the mining process, as well as ethical problems, the proponents argued that lifting the ban would contribute to the sustainable development of Greenland. Sustainable in this context means that the Greenlandic society would be able to sustain itself economically. The logic of this argument flies in the face of one of the most common assumptions about sustainability: that it is about protecting nature from adverse effects from human activity. Moreover, the argument sits uneasily with another understanding prevalent in the Arctic, namely that Indigenous ways of living are also worth sustaining. However, it makes sense within a national logic according to which it is neither nature nor culture but a particular community – in this case the modern, postcolonial Greenlandic one – that needs to be sustained. But unsustainable global levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emission destroy the natural habitat of the polar bear and make seal hunting difficult. So producing energy from uranium rather than oil may also contribute to sustaining certain Arctic ecosystems and cultural practices. The decision to lift the ban clearly exhibits the political character of the concept of sustainability.

The Greenlandic controversy is just one example of how debates over sustainability in the Arctic often come across as conflicting questions of life and death answered in slow motion. Listening to people talking and reading what academics write, sustainability appears to be at the centre of politics. For the presence in the Arctic of any activity or body – individual or collective – to be legitimate, it must present itself as sustainable or at least on track to becoming so. It was not always so. In that sense, sustainability has become a precondition for life in the Arctic. At the same time, it seems that 'sustainability' is able to serve any purpose. Sustainability as a concept entails radically different futures depending on what it is that should be sustained. The difficulties involved in prioritizing or combining the sustainability of a community, of Indigenous ways of life, of the global climate, and of a prospective nation state highlights the political character of the concept of sustainability and also why it is worth analysing.

The purpose of this book, then, is to investigate what it means to think of sustainability as a political concept. The way we do that is by answering the overall research question: *How are struggles over rights and resources in the Arctic reconfigured by the concept of sustainability?* To answer this question, it is necessary to engage the question of what sustainability *does*. What are the consequences of sustainability becoming an ‘obligatory concept’? And when we talk about consequences, we are not thinking about what sustainability does to the environment or to development, but rather what it does to political discourse. In response, this volume aims to posit sustainability as a political concept, suggest a framework for studying sustainability as a political concept, and set out a trajectory indicating the political and analytical purchase of such an approach. We want to be able to analyse and understand how, when the concept of sustainability is introduced, struggles over rights and resources are reconfigured: e.g. what difference it makes that Greenlanders and Nunavummiut – along with foreign investors and Danish and Canadian authorities – debate mining in terms of sustainability. How does ‘sustainability’ facilitate some and impede the promotion of other identities, projects, and scales?

Despite the fairly obvious political content of the concept, Krueger and Gibbs’ decade-old observation that ‘[e]ngaging the politics of sustainability represents a gap in the current sustainability literature’ (2007:2) still holds. Sustainability is a political concept because it defines and shapes different discourses about future developments; that is, competing visions of the future. Across the Arctic, sustainability plays a central role in almost every development programme. Aspirations of economic exploitation, business strategies, and social planning are defined in terms of sustainability. But so are local and Indigenous efforts to maintain a community or a particular way of life. Sometimes sustainability appears in conceptual majestic solitude in which case it signifies the urge, desire, or need to simply maintain something – or find a way to make everything form a synthesis.

The basic idea of sustainability has long historical roots. However, the articulation in the work of the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987) became a defining moment: it combined caring for the natural environment with ‘economic development’. When ‘development’ is added to the concept, ‘sustainability’ emerges as a more obviously political concept. The combination of a desire to change while keeping something stable fuels the political character of the concept. It raises the questions of what it is that should be preserved in the future while we at the same time undergo change? When? How? And who should be responsible? After the wedding of ‘sustainability’ and ‘development’, it was clear from the wider discourses involved that it was societies that should develop – both to become more equitable but also to allow the natural environment to be preserved (Redclift 1987). Soon, however, human collectives were featured at the ‘stable’ side of the equation: under the banner of ‘sustainable development’, advocates and analysts promoted communities, cultures, groups, livelihoods, and cultural diversity as worthy of being sustained (Jacobs 1999:37; Kates *et al.* 2005:11). Our contention is that this tendency has continued:

a wider and wider array of entities and phenomena appears as objects of sustainability.

It makes little sense to study sustainability in a vacuum. Concepts always carry with them a baggage of meaning conveyed by other concepts accompanying them – and when sustainability is introduced in a new context, it inevitably articulates pre-existing meaning structures. This will be obvious to anyone studying sustainability in the Arctic: here, changes to the climate, global power balances, demands for natural resources, and aspirations for self-determination set the stage for new political struggles. Central to the struggles is the notion of the Arctic as a special place characterized by a nature at once hostile and fragile. Moreover, sustainability has entered an Arctic political reality, which may be characterized as postcolonial: Indigenous peoples hold a prominent place and have comparatively strong organizations in the Arctic (Jacobsen 2015; Strandsbjerg 2014). Their relations to the respective states involve a variety of autonomy arrangements designed to distance the present from histories of colonialism, paternalism, and exploitation. Legitimizing Indigenous people's claim to a stake in Arctic governance is not just the fact that they were there first, but also that they managed to sustain themselves on Arctic resources. Hence, 'sustainability' has become a pivotal concept in struggles over rights and resources in the Arctic: it increasingly organizes the way Arctic nature and Indigenous identities are presented; it shapes what strategies for the future organization of postcoloniality and that future extractive projects are deemed viable and legitimate.

In order to analyse sustainability as a political concept, we commence by a historical and conceptual positioning of sustainability. In the following, we proceed by outlining a brief history of sustainability as a concept: we identify the marriage between sustainability and development as crucial for the way it plays out as a political concept; we characterize how prevailing images of the Arctic articulate sustainability; and we introduce the postcolonial and Indigenous question as an important vector in the politics of sustainability in this region. We then proceed with a theoretical suggestion on how to approach sustainability as a political concept. By dissecting 'sustainability' from 'development', we explain how our approach is discursive, but with special emphasis on the role of concepts in structuring discourse: We want to investigate the alterations in meaning structures and struggles for possible futures when 'sustainability' is introduced into the grammar of development. In other words, we want to know how identity, space, and time in the Arctic are reconfigured by sustainability.

## **Problems of sustainability**

Concerns with human dependency on limited resources and particular ecosystems can be found throughout history.<sup>1</sup> Central, however, for the present debate on sustainability is the intellectual trajectory that can be traced back to eighteenth-century forest management and political economy (Warde

2011:153). Within this literature, a genre developed advising the head of the household (the *Hausvaterliteratur*) to cut wood in a durable (*nachhaltende*) way (Du Pisani 2006:85; Petrov *et al.* 2017:3; Warde 2011).

### ***From household to globe***

Writing before fossil fuel could be utilized, a shortage of timber was predicted (Grober 2007:7), threatening the existence of both states (in need of timber for ships) and households (in need of wood for fire) (Warde 2011:159). Sustainability would be achieved by ensuring that the harvest of timber was made to balance the growth of new forest (Brander 2007:8). Connecting the local harvest with the interest of state, and planning longer than the normal year-to-year horizon, were the first steps towards establishing the resource management literature (Warde 2011). At the same time, this literature wrote the state in as a central institution/actor for nature preservation. The ideas of managing limited resources and connecting the future of the state with resource use remain core elements of the concept of sustainability today (Brander 2007; Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Warde 2011).

However, the defining moment for sustainability as a political concept was the work of the Brundtland Commission (Kirkby *et al.* 1996:1). With the work of the Brundtland Commission, the concept of sustainability emerged as a global concern in a way that was politically programmatic before it was academic, and the most cited publications remain commissioned reports. Brundtland's definition of 'sustainable development' as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987), has framed both environmentalism and developmental interests ever since (Quental *et al.* 2011:20). The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development reformulated the task ahead by identifying three 'interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars' or dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (Kates *et al.* 2005:12). Within this framework, sustainability generally relates humanity to the global ecosystem in a way that prescribes socioeconomic development to be shaped in particular ways, rather than delimited (but see Kristoffersen and Langhelle 2017:28).

When social sciences have engaged sustainability debates, what have been called mainstream voices (Krueger and Gibbs 2007:2) has joined the normative commitment to perfecting the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development (e.g. Sen 2009), identifying problems in terms of lack of sustainability (e.g. Parker 2014), and developing and implementing solutions in the form of sustainability (e.g. Edwards 2005). Partly in response to this, a critical tradition including postcolonial, Marxist and political ecology voices have insisted on the political effects of sustainable development (Bryant 1991); some have, for example, found sustainability to be yet another neo-colonial way for the West to dominate the rest by imposing standards limiting prospects for development (e.g. Banerjee 2003; Sachs 1990). While there is intellectual merit and political purchase to both constructive and critical perspectives, the binary choice

appears premature: neither loyal implementation nor wholesale rejection of the sustainability agenda help our understanding of the diverse political effects of the concept. Hence, we take our cue from a distinct strand of scholarship pointing to how the concept's contingent meanings may vary depending on inclusion and exclusion of actors, and the use of different indicators and time scales (Beckerman 1994:239; Lélé 1991:179). In this context, the contribution of this volume is to investigate systematically – within a particular region – exactly to what political uses the concept of sustainability is put and what practices it facilitates. It is to this end we theorize sustainability as a political concept and operationalize our theory as a tool for empirical analysis. For our immediate purpose – to investigate the Arctic – but also with the wider aim of contributing to a generally reproducible analytical strategy applicable to parallel projects in other regions across the globe or to studies focusing on, e.g. a particular socio-economic sector.

### *The problems of Arctic sustainability*

Sustainability takes on new characteristics when moving from global to regional scales. Prevailing images of both the Arctic population and the Arctic geography set them apart from the logic of global sustainability. Both scholarship and public imagination has long agreed that the Arctic is a special place; even if a variety of imaginaries differ over what makes the region special (Steinberg *et al.* 2015). Global sustainability discourse lists the Arctic among a few iconic biotopes – along with, among others, the rainforest and coral reefs (Gillespie 2009) – but the particularity of the Arctic goes beyond ecology. First and foremost, the Arctic has been defined as a forbidding space facilitating only fragile ecosystems and, consequently, home only to fragile human communities (Lorentzen *et al.* 1999:5) that were only relatively recently brought the joys and perils of modernity and substantial statehood. However, as time allowed white people to develop technologies to navigate this forbidding space, the Arctic is increasingly presented as a new resource frontier waiting to be exploited (Howard 2009) and, related, as a matter of global (military) security concern (Kraska 2011). Scholarly writing on sustainability in the Arctic was from the outset concerned with the fragile ecosystems, echoing the feeble intergovernmental institutionalization – the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy – defining the Arctic in international politics in the early post-Cold War years (Tennberg and Keskitalo 2002). As this strategy was given a firmer organizational basis with the formation of the broader mandated Arctic Council in 1996 (Tennberg 2000:120), academics followed suit, branched out, and placed human communities at the centre of a wider approach to sustainable development, including studies of, among others, whaling (Caulfield 1997) and hydrocarbon extraction (Mikkelsen and Langhelle 2008).

Most of the literature on Arctic sustainability relies on two very different but related storylines:<sup>2</sup> an image of the past in which vulnerable Indigenous communities were challenged by the forbidding Arctic environment; and an image

of the present in which modern industrialized extraction, production, and consumption unsettle global climate, Arctic ecosystems, Indigenous cultures, and local communities. When pollution threatens fragile Arctic ecosystems and changes the global climate in ways that spur further regional changes, scholarship often focuses on how particular local ways of living are gilded or threatened (Anisimov *et al.* 2007:672; Berman *et al.* 2004; Buckler *et al.* 2009). Indigenous people's experiences with surviving in the Arctic for centuries without undermining their own livelihood endows them a certain legitimacy in discussions about sustainability (compare Petrov *et al.* 2017:13 with Thisted in this volume).<sup>3</sup> However, the normative decision on whether change is sustainable or not relies on how Inuit culture is defined – and often it is defined by Western stereotypes of the Indigenous Other (Bjørst 2008:119; Fienup-Riordan 1995; Ryall *et al.* 2010): if Inuit are seen as essentially 'traditional' (e.g. Ford and Smit 2004), change is necessarily exogenous and potentially damaging (Cameron 2012). If Inuit are defined as part of an ecosystem, Inuit voices advocating socio-economic change are silenced (Bravo 2008).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Arctic long ago ceased to be an environment in which Indigenous peoples were the sole actors or even sole inhabitants (Wenzel 2009:94 in Sejersen 2015:183).

So the prominent role of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic does not have one straightforward implication for the politics of sustainability. Quite to the contrary, it gives rise to a series of complications and variations. Questions of how to organize postcolonial sovereignty and statehood are crucial for the political struggles currently unfolding in the Arctic. It is well documented how the Arctic plays a particular role for established national identities of some of the states laying claim to parts of the region (Hønneland 2014; Medby 2014; Williams 2011). Making Northern territories a periphery of Southern states obviously opens up sustainability projects at the national scale. When first contemplating how to implement the Brundtland agenda in the Arctic, one prominent group of academics and diplomats had so little confidence in the state that they advocated philanthropic foundations bypassing Southern capitals by directly sponsoring Indigenous communities – because 'we' should learn new directions from them – pursuing their own sustainable development (Griffiths and Young 1989). In the case of Greenland, the simultaneous presence of formal Danish sovereignty and visions of future Greenlandic independence (Gad 2014) invites a separate set of struggles over how to scale sustainability. Whereas the creation of new industries is a circumpolar ambition, it is crucial to the Greenlandic debate on how to create a sustainable economy and, hence, make the postcolonial future take the form of a separate state. Whether the state is Southern or Arctic, it needs to legitimize itself by telling stories about how sustainability is secured locally. These stories are intimately entangled with images of what constitutes a legitimate Arctic community: who belongs? Settlers or only Indigenous peoples? How should they live? What combinations of tradition and modernity are deemed sustainable? Such questions reappear in repeated calls for 'cultural sustainability' in the Arctic (Gad *et al.* 2017:18; Petrov *et al.* 2017:20; Søndergaard 2017).

In order to capture the political significance of all these variations, the following sections first separate the concept of sustainability from the discourse of sustainable development, then explain how we understand and want to analyse ‘sustainability’ as a political concept.

### **Between environmental and developmental discourse**

As the silver anniversary of the Brundtland Report has come and gone, you could build an entire library of texts on the true meaning of sustainable development (Redclift 2006). It seems well established that getting the concept of sustainability right is important. Both for getting development right and for understanding how it, nevertheless, goes wrong. So, why another volume on sustainability? Because, we argue, despite its growth, the library on sustainability still struggles to capture the political effects of sustainability beyond an affirmative or critical normative stance. Neither rationalistic conceptual analysis nor constructivist discourse analysis accounts adequately for its political effects. As laid out above, either sustainability is seen as a desirable goal, or the concept is identified as playing a negative role. This binary fails to describe the more fundamental political nature of the concept. In making this argument, it is important to assert that the concept of sustainability is not the same as the discourse of sustainable development; it has a distinct effect.

Within the broader literature, a tradition has been established that analyses both environmental and developmental policy as discourse (della Faille 2011; Dryzek 2013; Hajer and Versteeg 2005). Discourse analysts, particularly developing the Foucauldian approach, have done a convincing job in focusing attention on the importance of language for the formation of environmental and developmental policies (Hajer and Versteeg 2005). Discourses are basic packages of meaning, more or less tightly sealed, which allow actors to say and do things that make sense to each other.<sup>5</sup> Talking about objects, subjects, relations, and trajectories in a specific way makes them meaningful – and it makes them real. Concepts are one type of a wider range of rhetorical devices, which establishes the relations and trajectories of a discourse. For discourse analysts, concepts are little nuclei of meaning, imposing a certain structure on the discourses articulating them. Therefore, it is important to get them right; just as important as getting the discursive construction of objects and subjects right.

Rationalist conceptual analysts agree that getting the concepts right is important. That is what conceptual analysis is about: distilling the precise meaning of a concept, so that it can inform rather than obscure scientific and public debates and policy-making. However, conceptual analysts and discourse analysts disagree on the procedure. For rationalist conceptual analysts, getting a concept right is at heart a logical exercise establishing the correct meaning. For discourse analysts, it is an empirical exercise establishing how the concept is used; meaning what; to what effect.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, ours is fundamentally a discursive project. As other constructivists, we find that language has important effects on the formation of policy and on the creation of reality as we know it.



On the other hand, we find the role awarded to concepts in most discourse analyses on sustainability, Arctic and elsewhere, has been somewhat muted. Granted, it has a huge effect on whether a certain object is 'allowed' existence by a discourse: Understanding a fish as part of an ecosystem is something radically different from thinking of it as part of a stock ready for exploitation. Obviously, it has huge political effect whether you are offered the subject position of a savage tribe in need of enlightenment, of an Indigenous people liable for preservation, as a partner for developing politics, or of a nation working towards independence. However, if you think through these examples, you will find that these subject positions and these categories of objects receive much of their meaning from concepts establishing relations and trajectories: enlighten, preserve, independence, system, exploit. In other words, these concepts do things on their own. Over time, they may ultimately be malleable, but immediately when introduced into a sentence or a discourse, concepts carry with them meaning. Some of the most important concepts constitute very basic ideas about how objects and subjects can and do relate, and how relations can and do unfold over time. From this perspective, the composite concept of 'sustainable development' is an oxymoron, combining dynamism and stasis (Lempinen 2017:37).

Development focuses attention on change. It draws on the notion of progress; a basic idea that humans may – individually and collectively – over time, turn into better versions of themselves (Du Pisani 2006:85). As established by critical geographers, modern development discourse relies on a certain assumption about space as being fixed and operating as a stable background for social practice. Classic development theories such as 'modernisation' and 'stage theory' (Struck *et al.* 2011) operate within a unified and uniform global space without paying historical or theoretical attention to different spatial histories across the globe. Such assumed fixity and stability has in turn allowed academic engagement to ignore the social production of space (Lefebvre 1991). Related to this problematique, the clear demarcation of a social, human sphere distinct from a natural environment has been thoroughly deconstructed (Latour 2005; Lempinen 2017:52–55; Swyngedouw 2007). The absence of space has not only been questioned by academics, but also, for example, by non-state actors. Many Indigenous peoples do not apprehend their identity in a way that allows for a separate concept of a natural environment in the same way as Western thought (Bielawski 2003:318–320; Leduc 2013:109). Furthermore, we like to entertain the idea that the environment has called this absence into question. Understood as such, sustainability is indeed a concept that draws space in as a necessary dimension of political and economic theory.

If development is relational, this quality is secondary – relationality only appears by comparing entities as to their state of development. Sustainability, on the contrary, focuses attention on what should *not* change – and as a concept, it is relational before anything else. It claims that an object, a subject, or a process relies on its environment, so that both need to be taken care of if the existences of either are to continue.<sup>7</sup> Possibly, the paradoxes and detours of politics of 'sustainable development' – but also its proliferation and success in

framing debates, projects, and policies – comes from the paradoxical combination of change and constancy in this discourse. On its own, ‘sustainability’ is a question of ‘preserving something in its relation to something else’. Combining with development compromises, supplements, or complicates the temporality of sustainability.

In this volume, we focus on what the concept of sustainability does. First and foremost, what it does in and to the discourse of ‘sustainable development’, because this is where the concept is most explicitly highlighted these days – whether it is allowed to do its work or it is in effect submitted to development. But also what the concept of sustainability does when appearing ‘on its own’. Because, even if this work is less conspicuous, the very basic idea of continued mutually dependent co-existence between an object and its environment (natural or social) may be found way beyond the sustainable development discourse. And it is this quality of being a well-known rhetorical figure that makes it possible for ‘sustainability’ to be attached to surprising relations – and which, in turn, produces some of the surprising twists and turns of the composite discourse of ‘sustainable development’.

### **Sustainability as a political concept**

When we suggest analysing sustainability as a political concept, we make the claim that the concept intervenes in discursive struggles over the future allocation of rights and resources. This draws on an understanding of politics as a struggle between competing visions for the future (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Palonen 2006; Skinner 2002). Concepts employed to implicitly or explicitly prognosticate and prescribe the future are central means and goals in these struggles (Koselleck 1985:21). And because, in brief ‘[s]ustainability is always about maintaining something’ (McKenzie in Jacobsen and Delaney 2014), it prioritizes the preservation of a particular dimension of life even in the context of an effort of overall change to something better. To unravel the political effects of speaking in sustainability terms, we need to ask specific questions: What is to be sustained? In relation to what? How? As these questions indicate, sustainability is a concept that facilitates and structures a diversity of – partially conflicting, and therefore political – narratives of the future at a series of scales.<sup>8</sup>

The question remains, how do we know sustainability when we see it? Concepts are generally names for things and ideas (Bartelson 2001:25). However, words take on different meanings in different contexts, and similar meanings may be expressed in a variety of words. In principle, this conundrum leaves two diametrically opposed approaches open for the analyst: an onomasiological approach would begin with a specific word (‘sustainability’) and map its different meanings in different contexts, whereas a semasiological approach would begin with a specified meaning and map how this meaning is expressed in various contexts (see Elden 2013:18). To illustrate the difference between these two approaches, we can draw attention to how the US Arctic Strategy does not use the word ‘sustainability’ to describe the relationship between development and

the environment. However, through a semasiological analysis focused on the meaning of sustainability, we can show how the word ‘conservation’ is related to other words (like nature, culture, community, development) in ways that may (or may not) convey the meaning of the concept of sustainability. A purely onomasiological approach – registering only the use of the word ‘sustainability’ – would not produce a nuanced account of what narratives the concept or idea of sustainability facilitates: the meaning of sustainability can be produced without speaking the word.

When deciding the meaning of sustainability, which we search for in texts, we have to strike a balance between the ways in which meaning is produced both in synchronic and diachronic relations (Saussure 1916): when a concept is used in one context rather than another, it conveys a different meaning, as the concept is related to new things and ideas. So parallel synchronic analyses would show how sustainability does not mean exactly the same thing in, say, UN debates on development aid and in an Arctic business proposal. Meanwhile, a diachronic analysis will show how a concept moving into a new context necessarily carries with it some baggage of meaning, as its relations ‘backwards’ cannot be entirely erased from social memory.

The more central a concept becomes within a certain discourse the more likely it is that it is either taken for granted or implicitly invoked (Bartelson 2001:10). Moreover, a certain emptying of semantic content appears to be a precondition for a concept becoming central: an ‘empty signifier’ may articulate more different meanings (Laclau 1996). This does not mean, however, that it is futile to define what sustainability means because, even if the discourse of sustainable development may facilitate the promotion of a variety of mutually contradictory projects and programmes, the concept of sustainability nevertheless plays a similar role in all these narratives, albeit articulating different objects, subjects, and environments. To pin down such a moving target for structured analysis – beyond mere description of how words, meanings, concepts, and contexts are all in flux – the analyst needs to fixate the most important nucleus of meaning of a concept as a criterion delimiting what part of reality should come in focus (Andersen 1999). Hence, the delimitation of a core meaning of the concept of sustainability is pivotal. However, the less the semantic content of a concept is specified in advance, the more open it is to historical inquiry (Bartelson 2001:17), so we want to keep our definition as parsimonious as possible, to capture what is core.

The concept of sustainability refers to a relationship between (1) identity, (2) space, and (3) time. Global discourses on sustainable development link humanity at large (or a particular society), that is to develop, with its natural environment that should stay the same (Jacobs 1999:26; Lélé 1991). Understood in this manner, sustainability represents a specific way of temporally mediating the relation between society and nature. In its most common articulation with development, sustainability maintains the distinction between identity and nature, claiming that one can develop while protecting the other. When sustainability refers to society as the thing that should be maintained, it does

not necessarily entail a shift from nature to identity, but rather a rearticulating of the relationship between the two. Combining sustainability and development invites more complicated stories like ‘changing something progressively over time while at the same time preserving something else’ or ‘changing progressively over time to arrive at a state where this or that can then be preserved’.

As a mediating concept, sustainability points out a referent object – something valuable enough to sustain (Lempinen 2017:52) – and relates it to time and to specific environments (whether conceived as natural or social). At the highest level of abstraction, we define sustainability as the narrative positioning of (1) a given entity and (2) a specified environment in (3) a relation characterized by interdependence successfully sustained over time. Or in plain words: When someone claims that *x* and *y* are interacting in a way which may continue without terminating the existence of neither *x* nor *y*, their relation is described as sustainable.

Most empirical uses postpone sustainability to the future: They are formulated as ‘sustainability narratives’, i.e. visions, plans, and programmes for how to achieve sustainability. As part of a discourse, sustainability makes specific agents responsible within a specified space, organizes other concepts in coherent narratives, and inscribes specific forms of knowledge with authority. Hence, narratives built around sustainability rather than around another concept ascribe legitimacy to some claims to rights and resources rather than others. In other words, sustainability narratives constitute and empower certain types of actors. However, actors will, in turn, select and seek to manipulate narratives in ways that they find in accordance with their identities, given their perception of competing identities and narratives. The future is never given; rather, a plurality of narratives co-exist, making it a political question which future should unfold and how.

In the attempts to frame and discuss sustainability in the Arctic, we employ the concept of scale.<sup>9</sup> The analytical advantage of scalar analysis is that it highlights the variety of interconnections between different scalar materializations of sociopolitical power (Brenner 1999). In practice, scales are historically contingent, in principle fluid and malleable, and the very construction of scales is an important part of the politics of sustainability. However, for the most part in the present project, we employ scale in a more heuristic taken-for-granted sense that allows us to discuss the different political effects of sustainability in the encounter between different scales. Actors at one level may be made responsible for making a referent object at a different scale sustainable in relation to an environment at a third scale. On a global scale, sustainability often means something very different than what it does at a state or local scale, and any specific development project (such as mining in, say, Kotzebue, Nuuk, or Lac de Gras) will most likely have consequences (benefits, threats, risks, externalities) on many scales from the global to the local. Moreover, the construction and prioritization of scales play out surprisingly differently across the Arctic, not least due to differences in how the (post)colonial relations between Southern centres and Northern populations are organized.

### Analysing sustainability politics

As set out in the opening of this chapter, the overall purpose of this volume is to investigate how struggles over rights and resources in the Arctic are being reconfigured by the concept of sustainability. As discussed in the preceding sections, the concept of sustainability seeks to impose a specific configuration of identity, space, and time on discourse. To distil how this imposition works, the research questions guiding our overall approach to the politics of sustainability in the Arctic are:

- What is it that should be sustained? In other words: what is the *identity* of the referent object of sustainability?
- In relation to what environment should this referent object be sustained? What *space* is the referent object dependent on?
- How should sustainability come about? What *temporality* is produced when sustainability is combined with development (and/or other concepts)?

However, our focus is on the implications of the promotion of conflicting sustainability narratives; conflicting visions of the future, each structured by the concept of sustainability. In other words, our focus is on the interplay between competing claims about how *x* and *y* should (adapt to) sustain their mutually dependent existence. Hence, when each chapter approaches a body of empirical material asking ‘What should be sustained? In relation to what? How?’, the chapter is likely to identify more than one narrative. Moreover, approaching texts and practices with this reading strategy allows us to identify when the core meaning of sustainability is shaping them even without explicit use of any of the derivative forms of the word ‘sustain’.

Apart from applying the basic reading strategy, the chapters go about their task in very different ways. We have organized them according to how they weigh their implementation of our analytical strategy. Nevertheless, whether the focus of the chapter’s analysis is initially put on referent object, environment, responsibility, or the conditions for new interventions, in the end they each provide insights related to what sustainability does to identity, space, and time. Hence, they contribute to the overview, established in the concluding chapter, of how the politics of sustainability plays out in some of the most important issues across the Arctic.

Four chapters drive their analysis from a focus on what, according to the Arctic sustainability narratives, should be sustained. *Rikke Becker Jacobsen* lays out how three competing referent objects for sustainability – stocks, communities, and the public purse – complicates the governance of Greenlandic fisheries. *Kathrin Keil* surveys interventions on Arctic shipping and finds a surprising array of referent objects for sustainability. *Marc Jacobsen* compares how minerals extraction in Nunavut and Greenland is meant to serve different purposes – the sustainability of local communities and of the national economy of a nascent state – spurring different sovereignty dynamics. *Naja Dyrendom*

*Graugaard* investigates how postcolonial sustainability narratives surrounding Inuit seal hunting both depend on and seek to escape colonial ideas of indigeneity.

Three chapters focus on mechanisms for making distinct environments (ir)relevant as part of Arctic sustainability narratives: *Frank Sejersen* investigates how projects are phased and the social world continuously rescaled to produce sustainability in Greenlandic authorities' strategy to transform society by inviting in large-scale industries. *Elana Wilson Rowe* reads Russian policy documents along with political statements of the Kremlin and the RAIPON Indigenous peoples' organization to find how space is carved up to allow simultaneous protection of some natural environments and development made sustainable with reference to Indigenous social environments. *Lill Bjørst* traces how Greenland's own CO<sub>2</sub> emissions – and, hence, its contribution to global climate change severely impacting the Arctic – have been excluded as relevant for sustainable development of the island.

Four chapters focus their analysis on different ways of claiming responsibility and authority in the Arctic in relation to the sustainability of communities and ecologies. *Berit Kristoffersen and Philip Steinberg* analyse how Norway's comprehensive Blue Economy initiative appropriates the Arctic Ocean to sustain the legitimacy of the managerial state. *Hannes Gerhardt, Berit Kristoffersen, and Kirsti Stuvøy* compare how Russia, Greenland, and Norway each re-assert their version of state authority to protect hydrocarbon extraction in response to Greenpeace's vision of a transnational, networked solution to the global problem of ecosystem and climate sustainability. *Ingrid A. Medby* explores how Norway, Iceland, and Canada draw on discourses of sustainability when performing legitimacy for their Arctic identity. *Kirsten Thisted* distils how – even if indigeneity has been a potent signifier in discourses of sustainability – the way in which the Government of Greenland works with the sustainability concept affirms modernity and nation, rather than tradition and indigeneity.

Three chapters, in each their own way, focus attention on the conditions of possibility for new sustainability narratives: *Johanne Bruun* brings to light some of the challenges associated with constructing the Kuanersuit mountain in Southern Greenland as a uranium resource on which current popular and political narratives of economic sustainability in Greenland rely as natural fact. *Victoria Herrmann* surveys how remote Alaska Native communities seized the transition from diesel fuel to renewable energy as a way to build wider community sustainability. *Klaus Dodds and Mark Nuttall* trace how a variety of materiality, objects, and networks of knowledge create multiple contexts for ideas about sustainability to emerge, circulate, play out, and make themselves felt, in ways that make sustainability narratives stretch Greenland both geophysically and geopolitically.

## Notes

- 1 Du Pisani (2006) mentions how Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Greek, and Romans discussed agricultural/environmental problems in sustainability-like terms. By invoking the imagery of humans 'roaming the earth ... noticing the negative effects of overuse [of natural resources]', Petrov *et al.* (2017:3) extend 'sustainability thinking' to hunter/gatherer societies.
- 2 A wider set of storylines is lined up by Kristoffersen and Langhelle (2017), Steinberg *et al.* (2015), and Wilson (2007).
- 3 Petrov *et al.* (2016:170) condense a general tendency of extending this legitimacy into research on sustainability in the Arctic in highlighting how 'a special role belongs to the indigenous researcher'. The same group of authors, on the one hand, advocate '[b]ringing forward the important role of indigenous conceptualizations of sustainability [to] ensure that sustainability is not a vehicle of (neo)colonialism' (2016:171), while, on the other hand, assuring that 'the principle and meanings of IQ [i.e. traditional Inuit knowledge] are largely consistent with sustainable notions of human-environment relations' (2017:13).
- 4 In one perspective, the way that Indigenous peoples are systematically awarded some voice in the Arctic may give the impression of a comparatively strong position – in contrast to the erasure of Indigenous peoples in the sustainability discourse further south on the American continent, documented, among others, by Shapiro (2005). In another perspective, the subject positions available are products of colonization (see Graugaard, this volume; Spivak 1988).
- 5 Hajer (1995) points to the role of basic 'story lines' in keeping even conflicting positions together within one discourse. Hence, discourses may be simultaneously interwoven and competing, leaving even central concepts contested (Feindt and Oelse 2005:162).
- 6 In this respect, conceptual historians like Koselleck and Skinner join discourse analysts. Hence, Bartelson (2007) describes two approaches to the study of concepts: the historical approach studying the diachrone development in the empirical use of a concept over time; and the philosophical approach establishing the logical meaning of a concept within one synchronous slice of discourse.
- 7 Dryzek (2013:150) notes how sustainability concerns were first introduced in development scholarship – with reference to the natural environment – but primarily with a view to making development sustainable in the sense that (local) people should be able to sustain development by themselves and find the resulting society liveable. Sneddon (2000) advocates an analytical and theoretical focus on sustainability rather than sustainable development, to recover its critical edge towards capitalism.
- 8 It should be noted that we are not alone in seeking answers to the reference of sustainability discourse. Sneddon (2000:525), Hattingh (2009:64), and Lempinen (2017:52) have all developed related sets of questions to serve their analytical purposes.
- 9 Hence, we join a recent tendency towards focusing on scale-making in the study of environmental discourse (Feindt and Oels 2005:168) and particularly of Arctic development discourse (Petrov *et al.* 2017:62; Sejersen 2014, 2015; Tennberg *et al.* 2014).

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